

Historic relics themselves do no promote hate

by Mark Pavilons

Niagara's Regional Chair Bob Gale resigned recently, when it became known he owned a piece of history, namely a book signed by Adolf Hitler.

It was reported he owns a copy of 'Mein Kampf,' Hitler's political manifesto, written in the 1920s.

Saleh Waziruddin, of the Niagara Region Anti-Racism Association, said authenticating 'hate material signed by Hitler makes any reasonable person wonder.'

And Sherri Darlene of Justice 4 Black Lives Niagara added: 'It's shocking ... that Niagara's highest elected municipal official owns hate literature.'

Sorry to break it to you, Sherri, but our public libraries are filled to the brim with what could be deemed 'hate literature.'

The book is widely available in Canada. It is banned in Germany and Austria, but not banned in Israel, where it's primarily available for research and academic purposes.

Gale described himself as a 'passionate historian with a broad collection of historical art and artifacts.'

He said his collection includes an 1859 letter from anti-slavery advocate John Brown, a letter from George Washington, a letter from Winston Churchill and Vatican archives and a signed copy of the first book in 1685 about Niagara Falls by Father Hennepin.

People collect many historic documents, even wanted posters of some of history's worst criminals. Photos of dead gunslingers who had a price on their heads were quite the rave in our not-too-distant past.

These items are physical reminders of our past - they tell stories and tales about life, death, conflict and even debauchery. Our history is filled with all of those things.

Some collect these things because they are quite valuable, and historically significant, not unlike signed sports cards.

Believe it or not, the swastika is not illegal or banned in Canada, but it is in several countries around the world. Even those where the ban is in place, the symbol is allowed for 'academic, educational, artistic and scientific purposes.'

The swastika was (and is) a symbol of divinity and spirituality in several religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, but was perverted by Hitler.

We have to clarify and focus whether we're talking about hate-mongering or preserving history.

Nazi memorabilia includes a variety of objects from the war, specially those featuring swastikas and other Nazi symbolism and imagery or connected to Nazi propaganda. Examples are military and paramilitary uniforms, insignia, coins and banknotes, medals, flags, daggers, guns, posters, contemporary photos, books, publications, and more.

During the Second World War, Allied soldiers often took small items from fallen enemies as war trophies. Many found their way back here, to North America. A lot of items, to this day, are still being donated to museums around the world.

Some people are offended by, and condemn, auctions, militaria shops, online stores and other businesses selling Nazi antiques, and

find the goods and commercial trading as tasteless and hateful. Maybe, but most collectors are mainly interested in the historical background and are fascinated by the distinctive design of the items.

Collecting Egyptian, Roman, Viking or even medieval artifacts could then be seen in a similar light as these 'regimes' were all guilty of mass murder and genocide.

I believe these are mere objects steeped in antiquity. If they are religious, they bring comfort to people. If they are 'evil,' they serve as a warning. They all have value in terms of academic importance.

While not exactly the same, this line of thinking extends to freedom of speech and expression.

Any 'sentinel' of free speech is adamantly opposed to censorship and book burning. We journalists are among the most steadfast in preserving the sanctity of the written word.

The U.S. First Amendment's protection of free speech means that Mein Kampf is legal to publish, sell, and own. The Supreme Court has consistently ruled that even 'hate speech' is protected unless it directly incites imminent lawless action.

Here in Canada, public libraries have a similar opinion:

'Libraries have a core responsibility to safeguard and facilitate access to constitutionally protected expressions of knowledge, imagination, ideas, and opinion, including those which some individuals and groups consider unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable ... Libraries provide, defend and promote equitable access to the widest possible variety of expressive content and resist calls for censorship and the adoption of systems that deny or restrict access to resources,' says the Canadian Federation of Association Libraries (CFLA, 2019, para. 6).

Unfortunately, book banning has become our new national pastime.

The Centre for Free Expression defines censorship as the, 'suppression of words, images, or ideas that are deemed 'harmful' by those attempting to impose their personal, political, religious, or moral values on others,' while also noting that it can be carried out not only by governments, but private parties as well.

Does that mean The Holy Bible, Quran and Torah are all next on the chopping block?

In 2023, the Peel District School Board engaged in an 'equity-based book weeding process,' leading some schools to purge thousands of books. These books were, according to the social justice framework that motivated their removal, potential sources of student 'harm.' I wonder who sat in judgement of such a thing.

Should we remove all printed material that deals with hate, religion, war, murder, genocide, gender, slavery ...

That's not a true reflection of our world, and our past. You know they say if you don't learn from history, you're damned to repeat it.

I find it difficult to believe that a collection of memorabilia or regalia incites hatred against a group of people. That, my friends, is the evil that lies in the human heart.

We have legislated against blatant public displays of hate.

But we still allow people to gather, protest, debate and discuss what separates us, and brings us together.

Let's make the latter a priority.